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Feature

Coaching the Alpha Male

Bold, self-confident, and demanding, alpha males get things done. But the traits that make them so productive can also drive their coworkers crazy.

by **Kate Ludeman** and **Eddie Erlandson**

Highly intelligent, confident, and successful, alpha males represent about 70% of all senior executives. As the label implies, they're the people who aren't happy unless they're the top dogs—the ones calling the shots. Although there are plenty of successful female leaders with equally strong personalities, we've found top women rarely if ever match the complete alpha profile. (See the sidebar "What About Alpha Females?") Alphas reach the top ranks in large organizations because they are natural leaders—comfortable with responsibility in a way nonalphas can never be. Most people feel stress when they have to make important decisions; alphas get stressed when tough decisions don't rest in their capable hands. For them, being in charge delivers such a thrill, they willingly take on levels of responsibility most rational people would find overwhelming. In fact, it's hard to imagine the modern corporation without alpha leaders.

 What About Alpha Females? (Located at the end of this article)

Then why do so many of them need executive coaches?

As it turns out, alphas' quintessential strengths are also what make them so challenging, and often frustrating, to work with. Independent and action oriented, alphas take extraordinarily high levels of performance for granted, both in themselves and in others. As one business journalist observed after meeting Jack Welch and Andy Grove in a single week, "Jeez, are they impressive and stimulating! But am I glad I don't work for them."

The alphas we've worked with think very fast, and this rapid processing can prevent them from listening to others—especially those who don't communicate in alphaspeak. Their impatience can cause them to miss subtle but important details. Alphas, moreover, have opinions about everything, and they rarely admit that those opinions might be wrong or incomplete. Early in life, alphas realize that they are smarter than most people, smarter perhaps than even their parents and teachers; as adults they believe that their insights are unique and so put complete faith in their instincts.

Because their intuitions are so often proven right, alphas feel justified in focusing on the flaws in other people's ideas or arguments. As a result, coworkers get intimidated, which makes learning from alphas difficult. The more pressure an alpha feels to perform, the more he tends to shift his leadership style from constructive and challenging to intimidating or even abusive. Organizations become dysfunctional when people avoid dealing with a difficult alpha and instead work around him or simply pay him lip service.

Unemotional and analytical in their cognitive style, alphas are eager to learn about business, technology, and "things" but have little or no natural curiosity about people or feelings. They rely on exhaustive data to reach business conclusions but often make snap judgments about other people, which they hold on to tenaciously. Because they believe that paying attention to feelings, even their own, detracts from getting the job done, they're surprisingly oblivious to the effect they have on others. They're judgmental of colleagues who can't control emotions yet often fail to notice how they vent their own anger and frustration. Or they dismiss their own outbursts, arguing that the same rules shouldn't apply to the top dog.

The more executive authority alphas achieve, the more pressure they feel and the more pronounced their faults can become. (See the exhibit "When Strengths Become Weaknesses.") Alphas make perfect midlevel managers, where their primary role is to oversee processes. But as they approach CEO level, they're expected to become inspirational people managers. Unfortunately, most organizations aren't good at helping alphas make the required transition, which can be the greatest challenge of their careers.

When Strengths Become Weaknesses

Alpha Attribute	Value to Organization	Risk to Organization
Self-confident and opinionated	Acts decisively; has good intuition	Is closed minded, domineering, and intimidating
Highly intelligent	Sees beyond the obvious; takes creative leaps	Dismisses or demeans colleagues who disagree with him
Action oriented	Produces results	Is impatient; resists process changes that might improve results
High performance expectations for himself and others	Sets and achieves high goals	Is constantly dissatisfied; fails to appreciate and motivate others
Direct communication style	Moves people to action	Generates fear and a gossip-filled, CYA culture of compliance
Highly disciplined	Is extraordinarily productive; finds time and energy for a high level of work and fitness	Has unreasonable expectations of self and others; misses signs of burnout
Unemotional	Is laser focused and objective	Is difficult to connect with; doesn't inspire teams

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Alphas require skilled coaches because it's difficult for them to ask for help or even to acknowledge that they need it. They're typically stubborn and resistant to feedback. After all, they haven't gotten where they are by being self-reflective. As much as they love talking about accountability, they often fail to see that their own communication style, rather than someone else's shortcomings, is what's creating the roadblock. They're uncomfortable showing vulnerability or taking a break from constant action. The coaching process can make them feel unproductive and out of control.

But effective executive coaching enhances individual capabilities; it doesn't remake the alpha into an unrecognizable powder puff. The coach's challenge is to preserve an alpha's strengths while correcting his weaknesses. Coaches shouldn't undermine the alpha's focus on results; they should improve the process for achieving them. For the alpha, that distinction is of paramount importance.

In 2001, Dell embodied the corporate alpha archetype: its tough culture was all about getting results. But as the company matured and the tech industry faced its worst downturn, then CEO Michael Dell and president Kevin Rollins felt a need to change how the organization achieved its industry-leading results. They wanted to improve teamwork between the two of them and other senior executives, and they aimed to develop a more mature and welcoming corporate culture.

Michael and Kevin were respected throughout the organization for their intellectual acumen and superior judgment. But they were also considered demanding and, at times, intimidating. Not surprisingly, most general managers at Dell were cut from the same cloth and exhibited classic alpha leadership styles. Given their deeply analytic natures, Michael and Kevin began the change process by collecting data—inviting us in to conduct 360-degree interviews across the entire Dell executive team. This was not the first time that Dell had engaged us in executive coaching, but it was a more intense and focused process, driven by extraordinary commitment from the top.

Receiving critical feedback is never easy, but at Dell it has become an important part of the culture. Michael and Kevin set an example for other leaders by accepting difficult messages from their team and making visible commitments to the coaching and improvement process. The 360 feedback helped Kevin realize that his image as overly critical and opinionated was hindering his ability to inspire the organization. People thought he wasn't listening because he jumped in so quickly with his own suggestions, instead of building on their ideas. In his efforts to help his general managers improve their business performance, he was making it difficult for them to appreciate his input.

Michael, for his part, came to see that his intense analytic focus at times made him seem remote and "transactional"—even to his most-valued colleagues. Through the 360 process, he learned that his people found him hard to read and craved more direct feedback. He was surprised to hear that his attitude of "celebrating for a nanosecond" had made people feel they were only as valuable as the last quarter's results. Michael and Kevin also received feedback that tension between the two of them was causing anxiety in the executive team—something no one had been willing to tell them previously.

They resolved to improve their individual and joint leadership of Dell by agreeing to make only those major moves they both supported and to take their relationship from "good enough" to "great." As a symbol of this commitment, they built adjoining offices separated by a glass door that's always open. They now use humorous reminders to get each other's attention. Michael gave Kevin a smiling toy bulldozer and asked Kevin to place it on his desk whenever he felt Michael was trying to plow over him. Kevin got a Curious George stuffed animal to remind himself to become more inquiring and open to other people's ideas.

What started almost three years ago with a top-down personal commitment to change has subsequently enhanced organizational goals, modified the profile of the ideal Dell general manager, and launched a culture initiative called the "soul of Dell." Michael and Kevin, along with all Dell senior executives, receive 360-degree feedback on a regular basis, ensuring that the data collected are as fresh and objective as possible.

Alpha Coaching Traps

Like most alphas, Michael and Kevin needed help to step outside the constraints of their style and see themselves as others do. But alphas require a certain kind of coaching. The executive coach best suited to alphas has lots of experience handling superstars and standing up to bullies. The coach doesn't have to be an alpha, but it helps to share characteristics such as an analytic orientation and a direct style of communication. When executive coaches fail to help alphas and their organizations, it's often because they fall into one of three traps—each of which can stop the process cold.

First, some coaches make the mistake of playing "loose and light"—that is, they come across as too passive, simply reacting anecdotally to the alpha by falling back on their own nonexecutive experience and perspective. Alphas aren't loose and light people, and they won't see the coach who acts this way as either credible or relevant. After all, thinks the alpha, the kind of person who becomes an executive coach is far too nice and touchy-feely to ever understand what it really takes to deliver results. If an alpha believes his coach plans to turn him into an oversensitive wimp (which he knows better than anyone is the last thing his organization needs!), he'll never give the coach a chance.

A second trap coaches fall into is excessive secrecy. Coaches understandably want to maintain a high degree of confidentiality during their work. Some think that the way to get an alpha

to open up is to reassure him that no one else in the organization will find out about his vulnerabilities. By attempting to protect the client, a coach can unwittingly create an organizational black hole: Much effort goes into it; nothing ever seems to come out. But it's important not to operate in a vacuum. Only by seeking input from coworkers can the coach truly understand the issues surrounding the alpha's behavior. And only by talking openly about his commitment to change can the alpha turn around the pervasive organizational distrust he has created.

Coworkers must be included in the coaching process because lasting improvement requires the entire system to evolve. In many companies, coworkers are advised to manage around the alpha's behavior, which inadvertently enables and perpetuates the undesirable patterns. But as much as coworkers may have hated the behavior the alpha is learning to modify, at least it was predictable. When the alpha's behavior begins to change as a result of coaching, he becomes unpredictable. This can be terribly unsettling to colleagues unless they are included in the coaching process.

Possessing both intimidating personalities and genuine power, alphas expect the world to show them appropriate deference. But coaches should avoid the third trap—kowtowing—at all costs. This can be the difference between establishing a constructive relationship or an irrelevant one. It was with George Allen, former deputy commander of the Defense Supply Center Philadelphia, a \$10 billion business unit of the Defense Logistics Agency. George is a typical alpha male. At one of our first meetings, he charged into the room, ignoring our outstretched hands, and announced, "Let's not waste my time and yours. I've been like this for 30 years, and it's highly unlikely I'll change."

Instead of trying to politely persuade him to sit down and review the organizational feedback we'd brought with us, we said, "Fine. You're busy, and we could certainly use the four hours to do other work. Let's not waste your time or ours, if you don't want to make any changes." We started to close the big binder filled with brightly colored graphs mapping out his strengths and weaknesses. "Wait!" he commanded. "What's that?" That shift in interest was our first step toward establishing an effective coaching process.

The Right Way to Coach

Any executive with interpersonal problems has probably gotten feedback about them many times before we come along—so either he's never fully understood the problems or he just doesn't see any advantage to changing. Over the past 14 years, we have refined the process of coaching alphas to account for their personality quirks and help them see why they need to change their behavior.

Get his attention.

The best way to capture the alpha male's attention is with data—copious, credible, consistent data. That's why we always get 360-degree feedback on our clients. We interview all the alpha's direct reports, a half-dozen high potentials reporting to his direct reports, all of his business unit peers, and anyone in the organization with whom he competes. Our goal is to provide undeniable proof that his behavior (to which he is much attached) doesn't work nearly as well as he thinks it does. We let the data shape our questions. If we're told he is a poor communicator, for instance, we press for specifics: Does he interrupt people? Is he vague? Does he not listen? Does he fail to share information? Then we ask about the impact of his poor communication skills: How does his rapid-fire style affect your work?

A 360-degree assessment is a wake-up call for most alphas. They say, "Wow, these are people I deeply respect—strong performers—and they think *that* about me? I can't believe they're afraid to push back or that they think I'm stubborn and closed to their opinions."

Demand his commitment.

Once we get the alpha's attention in this way, we have the leverage we need to make him address unpleasant issues. Because he is both practical and driven, if you can show him an easier way to produce immediate results, he will typically embrace it. But before we go any further, we insist on the alpha's full commitment to the change process. We clarify his intention with two simple questions: Do you want to change? and Are you willing to do whatever it takes, including allowing us to help you?

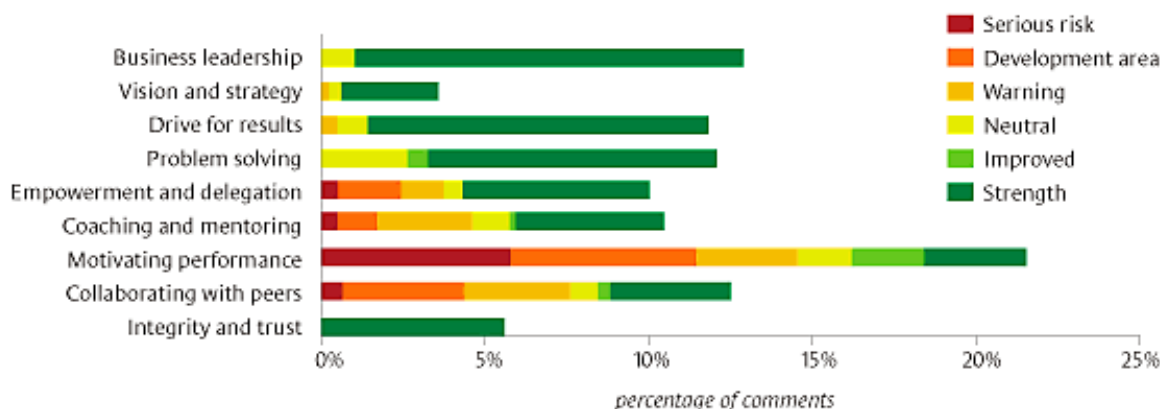
We wait until we get a clear yes or no, pointing out any nonverbal cues that imply he isn't committed (like saying yes while shaking his head no). If the answer's no, we don't continue. Trying to work with a defensive leader who isn't committed to change only wastes our time and his company's money.

Speak his language.

Since alphas think in charts, graphs, and metrics, for maximum impact, we present our data that way—in alphaspeak. We turn the feedback collected from 360-degree interviews into metrics and then inundate the alpha with quantitative data to make sure he values the information enough to act on it. The exhibit "Communicating in Alphaspeak" summarizes in a bar chart verbatim responses to 360-degree feedback, illustrating in a powerfully visual way the risks inherent in one individual alpha's style. He immediately can see his areas of strength highlighted in green and the areas requiring improvement in red.

Communicating in Alphaspeak

Since alphas are highly data oriented, we give them feedback they can easily relate to. This chart began as 50 pages of comments collected from 35 different people about a single alpha male during his 360-degree assessment. We organized the feedback into key themes and competencies, then plotted the responses graphically. The alpha can see at a glance what his colleagues think his strengths (greens) and weaknesses (reds) are, helping him focus first on the areas where he most needs improvement.



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Hit him hard enough to hurt.

After delivering the 360-degree feedback in graphical form, we review and discuss the verbatim comments from his coworkers, organized into competencies and themes. The alpha might be confronted with statements like, "He's brilliant, but he doesn't know a thing about people"; "We feel as though we've all been raked over the coals"; and "His need to engage in intellectual sparring and always prove he's right alienates the team." We deliberately preserve the emotionally loaded language we've heard to help the alpha realize the consequences of his behavior. Many alphas have been dishing out feedback with a two-by-four throughout their careers, and our process turns the tables on them. Since they believe in "no pain, no gain," they respond remarkably well to hard-hitting language. We regulate the level of pain, keeping it high enough to get their full attention but also presenting the changes as attainable. This is the point at which lip service frequently gives way to genuine understanding. One of our first alpha clients summed it up memorably: "It's like I've got interpersonal B.O.! I just never understood until now how bad it was."

Engage his curiosity and competitive instincts.











Blunt feedback invariably triggers defensiveness. The alpha generally believes that everyone else gets defensive, whereas he simply speaks the truth. We point out signs of his own defensiveness and show him how this mind-set prevents him from learning. Another alpha metric tool, the Defensiveness-Openness Scale, has proven highly effective in engaging the competitive instincts of alpha leaders. (See the exhibit "How Defensive Are You?") Defensive behaviors like delivering long-winded explanations, expressing subtle blame, or trying to figure out who made a particular comment all earn poor marks. Asking the alpha to monitor his own defensiveness motivates him to see how quickly he can catch himself and shift into a more open frame of mind.

How Defensive Are You?











Many alphas think that looking interested when someone speaks to them demonstrates a high degree of openness when, in fact, that's just the bare minimum one must do not to be labeled defensive. Alphas can use this tool to chart their progress toward a more constructive state of mind and to see how their behavior appears to others.

Highly Open



- +10  Plan the change, engage others, set milestones, and implement.
- +9  Communicate genuine enthusiasm about making a change.
- +8  Think out loud, making new associations about the problem.
- +7  Take full responsibility for the problem and its ramifications.
- +6  Request information and examples about the problem.
- +5  Openly wonder about your role in creating the problem.
- +4  Express genuine curiosity about the issue and how to resolve it.
- +3  Express appreciation for the messenger, regardless of delivery.
- +2  Summarize key points without interjecting your own thoughts.
- +1  Look interested, breathe, demonstrate an open posture.

Breakthrough: choosing curiosity over being right

- 1  Show polite interest while inwardly preparing your rebuttal.
- 2  Provide a detailed explanation of your point of view.
- 3  Justify actions with compelling logic and an interpretation of events.
- 4  Interrupt to give your perspective.
- 5  Interpret comments as attacks and feel misunderstood.
- 6  Convince them that you're right and they're wrong.
- 7  Make snippy replies and show your irritation nonverbally.
- 8  Blame or complain about someone who's not present.
- 9  Intimidate or attack the messenger.
- 10  Appear to comply, with no intention of doing what you say you'll do.



Highly Defensive

Five Steps Toward Alpha Growth

To change, the alpha must become more aware of his own motivations, more open to his peers' contrary opinions, and more comfortable with public challenge. He also must learn to deliver feedback that's useful rather than traumatic. When coaching an alpha client, we focus on five goals that will help him become a motivational leader of high-performing teams.

Admit vulnerability.

In our experience, when an alpha admits he is afraid or asks for help, the impact on his team is profoundly positive. So it is a key milestone when an alpha expresses a fear or exposes a vulnerability.

Dell's corporate culture began to change when Michael Dell and Kevin Rollins shared the results of their 360s with their executive team and, eventually, with thousands of Dell managers. Disclosing their imperfections was an uncomfortable stretch for them, but that action humanized them in the eyes of the team and made them more inspirational to the rest of the organization.

As one general manager recently commented: "Because Michael and Kevin have shared their feedback with us, we are all sharing our results with our own teams. We've all become more open, which builds camaraderie and trust. Knowing the changes my colleagues are attempting to make in their leadership styles also makes it easier for me to point out behaviors that irk me. After someone discloses that he periodically lobs grenades into meetings but intends to stop, we all have permission to call him on it. And we do."

It's natural for the alpha to want coaching and feedback to remain private. But the motivations of his colleagues can't be ignored. Some people might want to settle the score, others may be expecting the alpha to finally acknowledge all their hard work, and some may even want the soap opera to continue. Public disclosure helps clear the air, enabling the entire

organization to move forward.

When an alpha discloses the traits he's working to improve, it helps convince his team that he's serious about changing. Questions from the alpha like "How can I support you?," "How can I connect better with you?," or "How can I lead you more effectively?" address old grudges in new ways, opening a whole new dialogue across the organization. The stronger and more dominant the executive, the more powerful the impact of disclosure.

Accept accountability.

Alphas tend to feel very accountable for their own performance, but they have difficulty accepting responsibility for their impact on other people's performance. We've never found an alpha—or anyone else, for that matter—who doesn't try to shift the blame for performance problems to someone else. The blame is often subtle, but as long as it remains under the surface, problems won't get corrected. In fact, until the alpha accepts ownership for his share of a problem, it simply won't go away.

When thinking about accountability, we suggest that alphas use the "rule of three": If a problem occurs just once—for example, if someone on his team misses one significant deadline—it might very well be that another person is solely responsible. But if it happens three times—if, say, the same individual misses three deadlines or three different people miss significant deadlines—then the alpha must take some responsibility and ask himself what he should be doing differently.

Alphas frequently pin a pejorative label on a skill they don't possess to sidestep accountability. One alpha client, for example, used "politics" as his excuse for not accomplishing certain goals. We helped him see that it wasn't politics—the real problem was that he had only one tool to get what he wanted: the hammer. "Politics" was a smoke screen for not knowing how to persuade people to change their opinions.

Presentations that take too long to get to the point are a pet peeve of alphas, who often read ahead, assume they already understand the key points, and interrupt presenters before they can communicate their information adequately. Rather than sympathize with the alpha's impatience, we point out that it is the leader's job to teach his team how to present information appropriately. We help the alpha distinguish between blaming and claiming his share of the responsibility. If he finds himself complaining that meetings take too long and don't stay on track, for instance, we ask him to look at how he is wasting time and have him consider what additional coaching or guidance he might give his organization to correct those problems. If he feels frustrated that others don't understand the gravity of a problem, we ask him if he has communicated in a way that mobilizes action. When he becomes angry because peers won't modify a past decision even to avert a huge problem, we ask him if he has expressed his views in a way that makes people want to help him. When he feels the need to criticize an approach or process, we encourage him instead to contribute his own ideas. The most powerful step the alpha can take is to assume that whatever gets created "out there" is the direct result of something he has done (or failed to do) and is not simply somebody else's fault.

Paradoxical as it may sound, when a leader admits he's wrong and needs to change, he comes across as more confident and courageous than when he insists he's right. That's what U. S. Rear Admiral Dan McCarthy, head of the Naval Supply Systems Command, found when he asked us to help him improve communications flow in light of new challenges created by Operation Enduring Freedom. A big man with a forceful personality, the admiral initially responded to feedback delivered in a group meeting of 30 of his senior executives with a lengthy explanation and justification. But he caught himself and publicly acknowledged his defensiveness, taking full responsibility for the problem and the way his style contributed to it. Initially astonished, his team members quickly began to follow his example, identifying ways they each could improve communications.

Connect with underlying emotions.

The alpha doesn't like emotions because they cannot be controlled. He believes they impede logic and impair decision making. He will acknowledge that they play a role in motivating certain kinds of people in, say, a sales rally. But they don't play much of a role in motivating him, which makes him distrust them. Ironically, though, the alpha is often teeming with unacknowledged emotions that in reality cloud his judgment. He tends to be out of touch with his feelings until they erupt in anger. And beneath that anger often lurk other emotions. Sometimes it's fear that his company might take the wrong path; sometimes it's disappointment that he hasn't guided his team more effectively. Such subliminal fear and anxiety can be a real problem for alphas, because these feelings may be confused with intuition. (Is that flurry in the belly anxiety or a prescient intuition that something is off?) So it's important for alphas to learn to distinguish intuition from anxiety.

Our coaching focuses on getting the alpha to recognize his underlying emotions while they are still at the niggling, flurry-in-the-gut level, long before the big eruption occurs. Tying emotions to physical sensations makes the process seem more concrete. If we can help the alpha feel an emotion more fully, it is less likely to burst out at inappropriate moments. If the alpha can tell when his feelings are beginning to intensify, he can channel them constructively and avoid a temper tantrum.

Balance positive with critical feedback.

Alphas feel uncomfortable both giving and receiving praise, and they are adamant about not appearing soft. A strong manager, they say, is comfortable "telling it like it is." As a result, about 80% of the conversations an alpha leader has with his team will contain critical comments.

Underlying the alpha's reluctance to express appreciation is a self-perception that he does not require, or respond to, positive feedback. We help the alpha see that people reflexively react to criticism with defensiveness and resistance, whereas a balance of positive and negative feedback is more likely to motivate people to change. We don't try to replace all of an alpha's criticisms with validation; we want him to use both.

A brilliant alpha executive we recently coached has an uncanny ability to identify what's missing in a business solution. This has led his teams to scores of technological breakthroughs, and yet it wasn't enough to inspire individual performance or the commitment of his people. After many coaching sessions, we began to notice that, although he was generally open to our ideas and willing to take action, we weren't having much fun working with him. His lack of feedback or acknowledgment was discouraging, even to us.

When we shared that insight with him, he was dumbfounded. "But I'm spending all this time with you. I wouldn't be doing that if I didn't think I was getting a lot out of it." His words made sense, but what had seemed obvious to him was not obvious to us. He realized then that his tendency to criticize rather than validate was triggering self-doubt and fear in his most valuable team members. So he made a list of what he appreciated about each person on his team—not task-specific feedback but comments more reflective of each individual's overall talents and contributions—and shared them publicly. His team now enjoys an esprit they've never had before.

Jim Gibbons, president and CEO of the National Industries for the Blind, is the rare alpha who easily expresses appreciation. In an off-site team-building exercise, he wanted his entire executive team to experience the power of praise. So we asked all present to note their energy levels before and after a 20-minute period in which each of them expressed appreciation to everyone in the room. Though dubious, the team complied. At the end of the exercise, to universal surprise, everyone reported higher levels of energy and optimism. Every team we work with reports similar results.

Since the alpha tends to think everyone else is just like him, he often worries that people will equate praise with manipulation. He fears that if he tells people they're doing well, it will go to their heads, they'll stop working so hard, and they might even want more money. We help the alpha identify his fears about showing appreciation by having him complete two sentences:

- When people give me appreciation, I often think that _____.
- If I gave someone appreciation, I would be afraid that _____.

Then we work with him to identify barriers he puts up against receiving appreciation. These can include discounting, deflecting, putting himself down, explaining, distracting, joking, and countering by returning a compliment. Finally, we help him learn to express appreciation effectively. An expanded version of “good job” usually isn’t enough to motivate people. We tell the client to list all the people on his team, as well as all the peers he depends on for his success. Then we ask him to write out what he values in each person. For maximum impact, such feedback must be genuine and specific. It must explain how the person’s performance helps the alpha and the business. The alpha then must express his positive feelings to the individual, restating his appreciation several times—with different wordings—so that the person really “gets it.”

Become aware of patterns.

David was an inspiring and insightful CEO, but he also had a temper problem. He was usually warm and easy to connect with, but in tense meetings, he would invariably become angry and flushed and speak in a sharp, staccato tone that intimidated people, even though he never raised his voice. To help David become aware of this destructive behavior pattern, we looked for its roots. We asked him to recall the first time he ever reacted in this way, and he remembered being four years old and hitting his six-year-old brother over the head after his brother stole one of David’s toys for the hundredth time. And his brother never did it again. David roared with laughter when he realized he’d basically been using the same pattern ever since. He acknowledged that this approach was unlikely to motivate his senior executives.

People tend to slip into a whole set of dramatic, predictable roles that spring from the family and school dynamics in which they grew up. Many interpersonal problems in the workplace stem from people subconsciously gluing a family member’s image onto a coworker. The alpha may look like a demanding father to a junior manager or spark sibling rivalry in a peer. Almost no one is immune to these subtle family dynamics at work. They create the behind-the-scenes lobbying, venting, and complaining that characterize so many organizations.

We both see and are seen through our personas—through the roles we see ourselves playing or the roles others see us in. They act like distorted lenses and color the world according to their needs. The Rebel reflexively sees the world as full of people to be acted against. The Driver thinks the world needs supervision and discipline. The Jock views others as either winners or losers. Our projections intertwine with the projections of others, so authentic connection and communication become nearly impossible.

To get around this problem, we tell the alpha that any extreme behavior or recurring pattern signifies that he’s fallen into one of his personas. By giving the personas names and revealing how they work, we can begin to make the alpha more conscious of his behavior. Bulldozers, for instance, will plow through people if they think that’s what’s needed to get the right thing done. Some of their team members then become complaining Victims, who withhold good ideas because they don’t want to get run over by the Bulldozer.

Getting team members to give up these unproductive personas is a by-product of coaching the alpha. An executive team at a *Fortune* 500 pharmaceutical company, which had been extensively coached on personas, was debating whether to go ahead with a new acquisition. As the intensity of the discussion escalated, the group split into polarized camps. The CEO and COO pushed hard for the acquisition, while more conservative executives held back. The room crackled with tension. Suddenly the CFO, a large, gruff man, commanded the attention of the room by waving his arms and bellowing, “Mr. Rant and Rave is about to show up, and I can’t stop him!”

Laughter instantly broke the tension. By naming one of his own dreaded personas, he masterfully stepped beyond it. His self-awareness cleared the way for the group to review facts with a cool head. As a result, the CEO abandoned his Wheeler-Dealer persona, and the CEO and COO conceded their original position, thus avoiding a risky acquisition. Had the unconscious version of Mr. Rant and Rave appeared, no one would have laughed. The other team members would have escalated the drama, tuned him out, or disappeared, and the meeting’s objectives would have been forgotten. Instead, his awareness and honesty spurred others to let go of their defenses and move toward a constructive resolution.

What to Expect from Coaching

Prospective clients routinely ask how long the coaching process takes and what kinds of interim results they can expect. The answer varies widely, depending on factors like how broad the organizational involvement is in the coaching process, how committed the individual is to it, and how fully the culture of the company accepts it. For some alphas, 360-degree feedback followed by a half day of coaching and a few phone calls are all that’s needed for noticeable change. Alphas who are less self-aware usually need a half day of coaching sessions a month for three to 12 months.

Changes in behavior typically begin to show in three to six months, as the client harvests low-hanging fruit from our initial coaching efforts. Sustained changes take about a year. But the goal of coaching is to change the entire team dynamic, not simply to treat the alpha as an individual problem. After two years, an organization can be well on its way to transformation, with a dysfunctional and combative executive team turning into a collaborative and trusting one.

The alpha’s time and attention span are limited, and it’s not unusual for him at the beginning of the process to pay only lip service to the coaching objectives and avoid fully committing himself to the required behavioral changes. He needs to identify appropriate situations where he can begin to apply the new tools and approaches. Once an alpha gets to this point, you can count on him to follow through. As he begins to see the results of his behavioral changes, he initiates a powerful cycle that reverberates throughout the entire organization.

What About Alpha Females?

Ask people to identify alpha males in their workplace, and they’ll readily produce a list. But ask them if they work with any alpha females, and they’ll look confused. Are those the really smart women? The ones who are best at getting things done? Or are they the bossy ones? It’s easy to identify successful female leaders but often harder to categorize them. In our work with senior executives, we’ve encountered many women who possess some of the traits of the alpha male, but none who possess all of them.

Women can be just as data driven and opinionated as alpha males and can cope with stress equally well, but the vast majority of women place more value on interpersonal relationships and pay closer attention to people’s feelings. Women at the top are generally comfortable with control and being in charge, but they don’t seek to dominate people and situations as alpha males do. Although equally talented, ambitious, and hardheaded, they often rise to positions of authority by excelling at collaboration, and they are less inclined to resort to intimidation to get what they want. Female leaders are more likely to use a “velvet hammer,” tending to express orders as polite suggestions.

Like alpha males, some female leaders do have problems with anger and bullying, and they can be defensive and resistant to criticism. However, the corporate environment—and society as a whole—is much less tolerant of these characteristics in women than in men. So, far fewer women with these tendencies ever reach executive positions.

Top women can be just as challenging to coach as alpha males. Both have been extremely successful with their particular styles, which makes it difficult for them to see the need for change. But because women more readily understand the importance of positive motivation and the limitations of fear-driven cultures, they are less likely to avoid interpersonal issues. They may not enjoy delving into the touchy-feely zones any more than alpha males do, but they are more willing to because they understand that inspiring and motivating people are just as important as pursuing the right idea.

Like their male counterparts, most powerful women follow distinct behavioral patterns—but these patterns can be harder to recognize. When dealing with female leaders, you need to look for telling signs, just as you do with alpha males. Often stung by critical feedback early in their careers, many women avoid criticizing others in an effort to keep people's spirits high. Coming across as more affirming and validating than male alphas, they can lull their direct reports into believing that all is well when it is not. Then their reports feel blindsided when they find out that their positions are in jeopardy and they hadn't been given a chance to correct problems before it was too late.

Female leaders are less comfortable with conflict, while alpha males thrive on it. When the alpha male doesn't like something, he states it loud and clear. A female leader can be less willing to force an issue publicly if she doesn't anticipate quick assent. Being more interested in collaborating and finding win-win solutions, she'll happily debate an idea until someone's emotions are triggered, at which point she'll back down rather than press toward resolution. This indirect style of communication is often misinterpreted by male peers; in fact, some of our female clients have been accused by peers of being political and having hidden agendas. A woman leader should be aware that her indirect style can engender distrust among certain kinds of men. What she calls diplomacy, he calls politics.